



MARKETING STAR



Juan J. Alfonso: Vice President of International Marketing for ESPN

[By Anique Gonzalez]

This may not come as a surprise, but Juan J. Alfonso loves his job. He not only has the opportunity to collaborate with amazing people, to promote a well-known and respected brand, and to take on challenges that span the globe, but on a daily basis he gets paid to think about, discuss, and publicize sports. "I've had some amazing jobs in my career. I've always worked with cool, interesting, dynamic brands, but this is my favorite job I've ever had," he reveals.

Having lived in several different countries while growing up, Alfonso decided that he wanted to pursue a career that had international ties. After working for an import export company after graduating from college, a job that Alfonso did not find fulfilling, he moved to San Francisco where a friend talked him into considering an employment opportunity with the advertising agency Goodby Silverstein & Partners.

"He showed me the agency reel, and they had HP and Porsche and Got Milk, all of this cool stuff, and they had dogs running around the office, and there were pretty people everywhere. And I realized, 'wow, this is what I want to do.'"

While dogs and attractive people always help to create an appealing workplace environment, the real reason that marketing intrigued Alfonso was because the field requires one to take into account concepts, insights, and strategies from several differing disciplines. "The blend of the business savvy that you have to have to convince a consumer to do something with the art form of being able to communicate in a culturally relevant context...it's art and science, and you have to be good at both. And I always love that challenge," he explains.

After working at several ad agencies on campaigns for well-known brands such as Saturn and the Miller Brewing Company, and contributing to numerous projects that dealt

with Hispanic markets, Alfonso eventually joined ESPN in 2004. In his initial role with the organization, Alfonso contributed to campaigns aimed at the Hispanic market

and was instrumental in the launch of ESPN Deportes, ESPN's Spanish language channel.

An obvious assumption would lead some to believe that this extensive history in the advertising field would present challenges as Alfonso transitioned to a more general marketing role. However, he has thrived. "I've always been very lucky to work at agencies that took a much broader approach to campaigns. It wasn't only television and radio and billboards. So I've been lucky in that respect that it wasn't a single-media-focused approach and because of that open mind about that we will try unglamorous tactics sometimes. We're not scared to use the widest possible array of marketing tactics. And the places where I worked really sort of drilled that into my head," he says.

Soon into Alfonso's tenure with ESPN, his job took an international turn as he became Vice President of International Marketing. In this position he oversees all marketing activities for networks outside of the United States, a task that, while immensely enjoyable and gratifying, presents unique obstacles.

"It's an incredible marketing challenge of taking this brand that is so ubiquitous in the United States and so omnipresent in anything related to sports, and trying to replicate it in other countries," he states. "How do we make the brand relevant and interesting to the consumer there?"

Q: What do you like to do in your spare time?

A: Try to spend as much time as possible with my son, who is three. I love to travel. I get to do quite a bit of that for business, but I love to travel for fun. What we'll do is...tend to pick one place and try to spend a week to ten days in that one place really getting to know it... Play the guitar. And I love sports, not only professionally, but in my personal life as well.

Q: Throughout your lifetime, what movie have you watched the most?

A: What movie have I watched the most? I want to say something that's not embarrassing. I should say something like *Citizen Kane*, right? That's definitely not the real answer. How about *Rocky*.

Q: What was the last book that you read?

A: Harry Potter 7 [*Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*].

Q: What was the last CD that you listened to?

A: *Pafuera Telarañas* by Bebe.

Q: If you had an extra hour in the day, what would you spend it doing?

A: I'd spend it with my son.



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Moreover, that challenge is no longer tied only to TV. According to Alfonso, the challenge of marketing the brand internationally has grown to include magazines, radio stations, websites, and mobile services, which brings new and varied challenges each and every day. Ultimately though, regardless of the product being marketed, what the brand represents and how that should be conveyed to the consumer is the basis for all marketing activities. "What does ESPN mean to the consumer? How are we serving the sports fan by doing what we're doing? That's sort of the questions that we keep coming back to," Alfonso explains.

Answering those questions is often a difficult undertaking. However, it is one that can be accomplished if you truly know and understand your consumer. Especially in the international arena, marketers must recognize the subtle and complex

social differences among countries and address those disparities when developing campaigns. As a marketer it is sometimes easy to assume that you know how consumers think, feel, and believe. But it is vital that marketers take a step back and ask themselves this question: Does the audience really see it that way? Your way?

Working on campaigns geared exclusively toward the Hispanic market while in the advertising field many years ago has prepared Alfonso for the vital task of understanding the consumer. Those experiences in particular taught him that each group must be approached in a unique way that is applicable to them. "It really helps you to take a brand and think of it in a different cultural context and [think about] how to communicate the same values of a brand, the same attributes of a brand, to a consumer that will experience it in a slightly different way," he says.

"You have to know your audience inside and out. You have to do your homework. You have to do your research. You have to be out there with them. [Otherwise,] not only are you wasting your money, you're doing your brand a disservice."

For Alfonso, and ESPN, that means understanding the consumer to such an extent that they are able to effectively and successfully serve the sports fan wherever sports are watched, talked about, read, debated, and played.

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